* The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Change *
* Topic: Paul: A Change of Purpose * Acts 9:20-31 * 1/19/25 *

MAIN POINT

The life of anyone who has accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord should be radically changed forever. And one of the big changes we should experience is a complete overhaul in our purpose for living. Our purpose for living should now be based on knowing Christ and make Him known to others.

INTRODUCTION

What is one of your favorite hobbies? Does this relate to what you value in life, or is it more of a distraction?

How might Christians answer this differently that secular Americans might answer it?

Many of our pursuits are directly related to what we view as our purpose in life. Some hobbies are simply a way to relax or wind down, but our values as Christians should exclude certain activities that non-Christians might find as normal endeavors.

Note to study leader: The current sermon series at The Heights is titled "Change." We started by looking at how God supernaturally intervened in Paul's life to lead him to Christ. Today's lesson continues by looking at how Christ changed Paul's purpose in life. We will be considering this by continuing in Acts 9, picking up right after Paul's dramatic encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.

UNDERSTANDING

REVIEW

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:1-19

We looked at this passage from Acts in our first week while studying this sermon series. How would you describe Saul's purpose in life prior to coming to know Christ?

Saul intended to stamp out Christianity. His desire to go to Damascus reveals the extent of his hatred.

How do you harmonize what God tells Ananias about Saul in verse 16 with the "prosperity gospel"?

You can't ☺

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:20-22

How did the people initially react when they heard Saul preach that Jesus is the Son of God?

The people were astonished. The probably expected Paul to vigorously warn against the new teaching that claimed Jesus is the Messiah. What he taught was the opposite of this.

Look back at Acts 9:5 and compare it with Acts 9:20. How did the last recorded words spoken by Paul contrast with the first words Paul publicly preached in the Synagogue after coming to Christ?

Paul had changed from having no idea who Jesus was to preaching that Jesus is the Son of God.

Look back at Acts 9:1 and compare it with Acts 9:22. How do these verses demonstrate how Paul's purpose in life had changed after coming to Christ?

Paul had been passionately dedicated to eradicating Christianity, and now see him using the scriptures to publicly prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Paul's purpose in life had changed to the point he was now going in the exact opposite direction from where he had been going.

What symbolism do you see if the fact that immediately after Ananias said Paul would be filled with the Holy Spirit, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and his blindness was removed?

Jesus is the light of the world. Without Him, we are in darkness (John 8:12).

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 9:23-31

As Saul started preaching about Christ, what effect did it have on the people (v. 22-24)?

What initial effect did Saul's conversion have on the church (v. 25-26)?

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ACTS 4:36 AND ACTS 11:22-24

What do these verses teach us about Barnabas?

The fact that the apostles called him Barnabas shows us he was gifted at encouraging others. And he is also described as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, who encouraged others.

Note to study leader: The Greek word for "Encouragement" in Acts 4:36 is "paraklesis", which means to come near, encourage, console, and refresh. What a testimony about Barnabas' character that the apostles would choose to give him this name. It is worth noting that later in their ministry, after John Mark had abandoned Paul and Barnabas, Barnabas was willing to give Mark another chance, while Paul didn't think that was a good idea (Acts 15:36-41). Who was right? It looks like God used this disagreement for good in both of their lives, and for the greater good. Paul joined up with Silas, and together they became the greatest missionary team in the history of the church, while Mark went on to write the gospel of Mark.

Why do you think Barnabas was willing to stand up for Saul when no one else was?

For all the reasons we saw in the other passages in Acts.

How would you weigh the risk versus the potential benefit of Barnabas choosing to accept Saul, and what lessons can we learn from this?

Barnabas provides an example of being a disciple of Christ, operating out of love for God and love for others. As a result of Barnabas's defense, the apostles accepted Saul into their fellowship and they opened doors of opportunity for him to minister and spread the gospel in Jerusalem. Saul became a bold witness for Christ during times of persecution.

Acts 9:31 ends the account of Saul's conversion and early walk with Christ. After this, the church experienced peace, growth, and encouragement from the Holy Spirit.

A CASE STUDY FROM THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

We see how Saul's purpose in life radically changed after coming to Christ. And we've seen another example of this in Barnabas. We'll now look at a negative example from the church in Corinth. This was an immature church, where people were boasting about which church leader they followed (1 Cor. 1:11-13) and boasting about which spiritual gift they had received (1 Cor. 12).

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 1 CORINTHIANS 4: 6-16 AND 2 TIMOTHY 3:12

For what does Paul rebuke these immature Christians as Corinth?

They were behaving as if they already had all they wanted. Christianity to them had become a way to promote self. The Corinthian believers involved in prideful factions behaved as if their gifts and wisdom made them better than the others.

Based on this passage, how would you contrast the attitude of Paul with the attitudes of the Corinthian believers?

To bring out the irony he saw in the Corinthians' pride, Paul contrasted his experience of suffering with their pride and boastfulness.

Why is pride such a destructive trait in those who follow Christ? Why is it so tempting to become prideful?

Why is it important that we not see ourselves as being "above" suffering and persecution?

What does it look like to join in Paul's suffering, pain, and weakness?

Paul points out that the apostles themselves—the very people over whom the Corinthians divided—did not live up to the Corinthians' boasts and were completely unaligned with their boasting.

The Corinthians felt superior because they followed certain people. But this is not what the people they followed exemplified. Did they follow Peter? Peter was persecuted, and he rejoiced in his suffering (Acts 5:41). Paul was persecuted and considered it a way to draw closer to Christ (2 Cor. 1:8-11). Did they follow Jesus? He is the perfect example of enduring persecution to obey the Father's will. They could not rightly claim to follow these leaders and also claim to be above suffering and persecution.

How do the contrasting attitudes of Paul and the Corinthians demonstrate their true purpose in life?

We are known by our fruit (Matt. 7:16). Our actions and priorities reveal our purpose in life.

What lessons can we learn from this example?

Just because we are saved, it doesn't mean we will automatically align our purpose in life with Christ. We need to choose to put on the new nature and put off the old (Colossians 3:1-3, 9-10).

APPLICATION

Is there something in my life, not even necessarily bad in itself, that I need to remove or adjust to better align the purpose of my life with the purpose God has for me?

Ananias and Barnabas played important roles in following up and discipling Paul. Stop by the "Next Steps desk if you would like more information about how to get more involved in this process.

PRAYER

Thank God for choosing even the most unlikely people for His kingdom. Ask God to give us the grace we need to choose to live up to our calling in Christ, and that we would align our purpose and priorities with Christ and the advancement of His kingdom. Ask God to help us have His perspective on suffering for Christ. Thank God that all of our light and momentary troubles in this life are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

COMMENTARY

Acts 9:20-31

9:20 Saul's conversion completely changed his life. He had become a follower of Jesus Christ. Saul stayed in Damascus for some days, likely becoming oriented to basic Christianity even as he began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues. He gave priority to the synagogues throughout his ministry, starting there before being forced to take the message elsewhere.

9:21-22 Understandably, the initial response of the church to Saul was skeptical amazement, but as he grew more capable he was able to confound unbelieving Jews, proving that Jesus is the Messiah. The Holy Spirit enabled him to explain the messianic connections between the Old Testament and Jesus so clearly that the Jews in Damascus could not refute him.

9:23-25 Saul faithfully preached Jesus as Messiah for long enough to become the uppermost enemy of unbelieving Jews in Damascus. He had come to help their struggle against the growing Christian movement, but now he had become the chief cause of its growth. Thus they conspired to kill him. Unable to leave via the city gates, Saul escaped in a most undignified but effective manner: he was placed in a large basket and shoved through an opening in the wall (literally "through the wall").

9:26 Unable to refute Saul in debate, the Jews plotted to kill him. His disciples helped him escape from Damascus (vv. 23-25). Saul traveled south to Jerusalem and attempted to associate with the disciples there. Understandably, they didn't initially trust him, and were all afraid of him. After all, shortly before this time he had persecuted the Jerusalem church, hunting down, and imprisoning believers (see 8:3).

9:27 Barnabas, "Son of Encouragement," took a tremendous risk. He was a respected believer whom the disciples trusted. He had generously contributed to Jerusalem Christians' needs (see 4:36-37). Barnabas took Saul to the apostles—the Twelve. Convinced Saul was a genuine believer, Barnabas was willing to act as a mediator with the apostles. The Greek text will allow the explanation in the latter part of the verse to be Barnabas's or Saul's words. The explanation recounted Jesus' appearing to Saul on the road to Damascus, their conversation, and Saul's bold preaching about Jesus in Damascus.

9:28 The apostles accepted Saul into their fellowship. That he was coming and going with the apostles indicates his full identification with them. The implication may be they opened doors of opportunity for him in Jerusalem. He was speaking boldly about Jesus in Jerusalem's synagogues, mainly in those of the Greek-speaking Jews.

9:29 Saul conversed and debated with the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews. Saul took up Stephen's work and likely advocated Stephen's view that the gospel is for every person. Saul's background as a Jew who was born and had lived in a Gentile area, Cilicia, equipped him to speak to and debate with these Jews. If Saul had debated with Stephen, that experience—coupled with his viewing the manner in which Stephen died—doubtless had a profound effect on him. The Hellenistic Jews reacted to Saul as they had responded to Stephen: they attempted to kill Saul. His claims for Christ enraged the synagogue members; they considered him to be a traitor to Judaism and sought to eliminate him.

9:30 Members of the Christian community discovered the plot to kill Saul. These believers escorted him to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, where he boarded a ship bound for Tarsus, his native city in Cilicia. Saul's name does not resurface in Luke's narrative until Acts 11:25, in events of about 10 years later. Saul demonstrated his intense commitment by going to Jerusalem and meeting with the disciples. In addition, he preached about Jesus and risked his life by debating some Greek Jews about Jesus.

9:31 This verse marks a significant point in the development of the early church. The church, having been forced by persecution to scatter outward from Jerusalem, was at peace in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. This set the church up for a second stage of growth, which would see the gospel boldly taken outside Israel.